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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, AF/SPG, AF/E, PRM FOR LANGE

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF EGYPT'S UPDATE ON REFUGEES

REF: CAIRO 267

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Egyptian MFA Refugee Office Director Tarek Maaty told us on February 9 that the disagreement over the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' call to open the Gaza borders had passed (reftel). He said that a senior UNHCR official will come to Cairo to work on a combined vision for refugees in Egypt. Maaty told us that Government of Egypt (GOE) did not involve UNHCR in a January Gaza relief meeting because it is UNRWA's mandate to handle Palestinian issues. He stated that there have been no shootings of African migrants on the Egypt-Israel border in two months. He outlined a three-part Egyptian solution to reduce the number of refugees in the country. This includes the return of refugees to either countries of origin or first asylum, low-profile resettlement, and preventing new refugees from illegally entering Egypt by land or sea. End Summary

GOE-UNHCR Relations

¶2. (C) Tarek Maaty, Egyptian MFA Refugee Office Director told us on February 9 that the GOE did not appreciate UN High Commissioner Guterres' call to open the borders during the Gaza crisis. He said that UNHCR explained that the statement was for a regional audience, and not targeted at Egypt. Maaty stated that because of the UNHCR explanation, "the situation has passed." Maaty told us that a "high official" from UNHCR will come to Cairo to agree on a "combined vision" on refugees (reftel). However, UNHCR Regional Representative Saad al-Attar told us on February 22 that the GOE had not yet granted UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Feller any meetings.

¶3. (C) Maaty said that the GOE did not involve UNHCR in January 2009 coordination meetings on Gaza because "UNHCR has no mandate to be involved in Gaza or with the Palestinians" (reftel). He said that working with Palestinians is UNRWA's role. He stated that UNHCR worked with the Egyptian Red Crescent to provide some basic supplies to Gaza.

African Migrant and Refugee Issues

¶4. (C) Maaty told us that there had been no shootings of African migrants on the border with Israel in two months. He said that there is not a policy change, but instead he opined it was result of U.S. advocacy, and a MFA recommendation to the Egyptian police, not to shoot migrants. Maaty told us on February 22 that he drafted a letter for FM Aboul Ghayt which will ask Egyptian security to continue not to shoot migrants.

Privately, Maaty's Assistant Reham Kholeif told us that "Egypt knows that President Obama is concerned about the plight of Africans, and we want to lay the groundwork for a good relationship."

¶5. (C) Maaty told us that Canada decided to take all 118 Eritreans being held in Aswan, if they met health requirements. However, he said that the GOE was having difficulty moving them to Cairo because security was concerned that some would not pass the medical evaluation. He said that the GOE was working with UNHCR to facilitate meetings between the Eritreans and a Canadian consular official, but the GOE wants a guarantee that all the Eritreans will be resettled by other Western countries even if rejected by Canada. Helen Girard of the Canadian Embassy in Cairo told us on March 3 that Canada had conditionally accepted the 118 Eritreans, if they meet the asylum and medical criteria. She interviewed seven asylum seekers in Aswan in September 2008, and accepted them for resettlement pending medical examinations. However, she has not met with any of remaining 111 and the GOE has not allowed the seven to do their medical examinations.

Egypt's Refugee Strategy

¶6. (C) Maaty told us that the GOE wants to reduce the number of refugees in Egypt. Egypt has a three-part solution to handling its refugee population. First, Egypt supports the return of refugees to their countries of origin, or countries of first asylum. Second, Egypt would like to see Western countries quietly increase the number of refugees resettled and expedite the resettlement process. Third, the GOE wants to increase border security to prevent new refugees from entering Egypt. Maaty said that Egypt wants to cooperate with the U.S. to stop refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia from coming to Egypt. He asked for our ideas on how to better monitor the Egypt-Sudan border and the Red Sea so refugees would not enter Egypt illegally. Maaty told us that the GOE was working with the Government of Sudan (GOS) "to take some refugees" (reftel). However, he acknowledged that Sudan has its own problems with IDPs making it difficult for the GOS to accept refugees.

¶7. (C) Comment: Maaty, the MFA's refugee "go-to" person, was upbeat about Egypt's progress on African migrants, and did not appear concerned with the problems over the HC's comments on Gaza in January. Egypt has always advocated for return or resettlement of refugees, but this is the first time that Maaty mentioned the need to control its border with Sudan and traffic on the Red Sea. Better monitoring of the border and the sea would not only affect the flow of refugees, but could also curtail the flow of illegal arms. Maaty also asked the U.S. Embassy and the Department to publicly acknowledge Egypt's improvement on the border. Maaty is a good interlocutor on refugee issues, but is assigned to take up the post of Egypt's Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire in late March or early April. His replacement has not yet been named.

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